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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Thailand: The Present Political Phase

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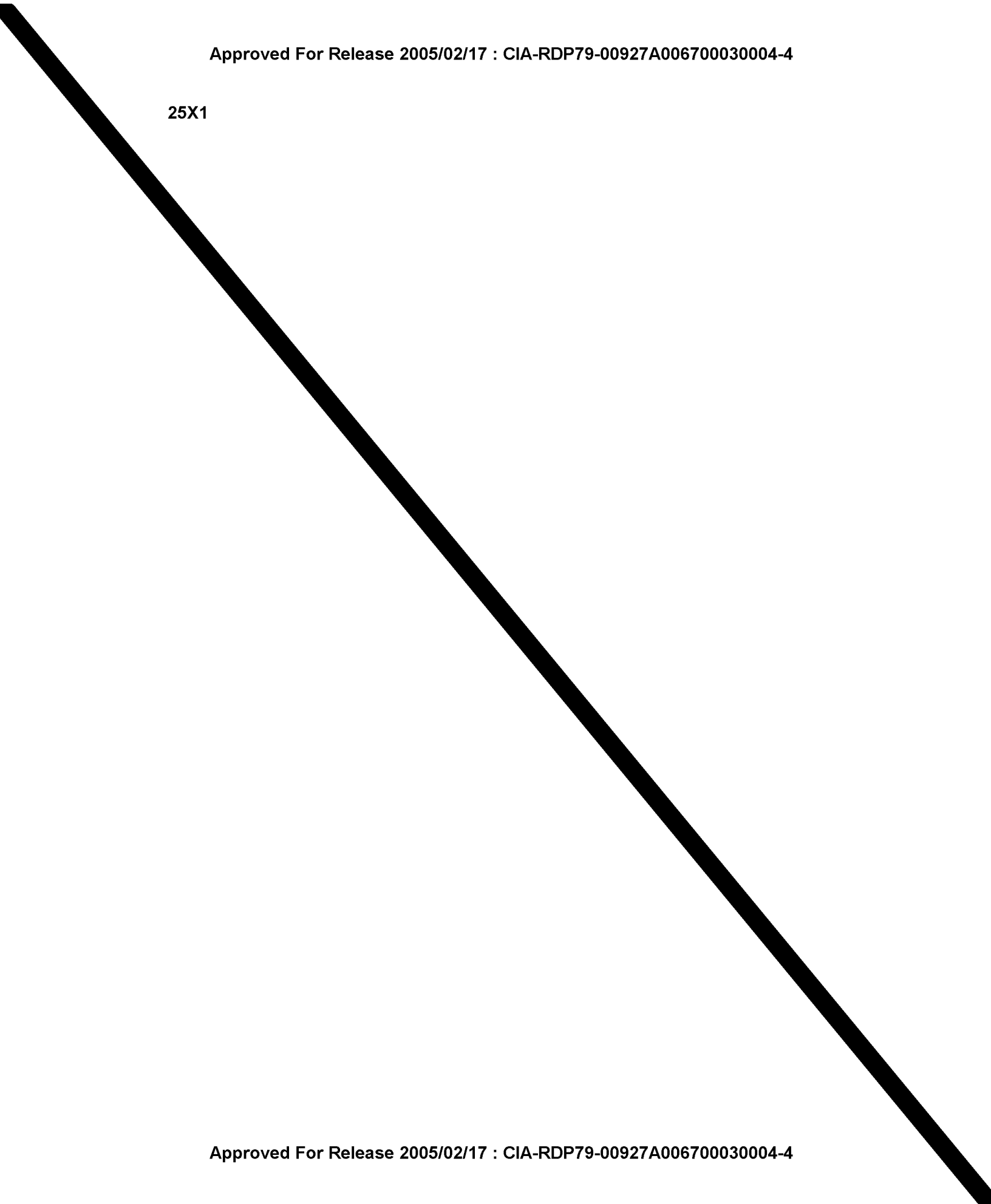

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THAILAND: THE PRESENT POLITICAL PHASE

Thailand is entering a new phase of its political life. Aften ten years of rule by martial law, the military leadership is moving to legitimize its rule. A new constitution has been promulgated as the first step in this process, but the document virtually ensures that there will be no major changes, at least in the near future, in the way Thailand is governed.

The constitution does provide for the first nationwide elections in over a decade. Although the elections are now less than five months away, the government so far has done little to organize itself for them. Opposition forces are also divided and weak, but they may prove strong enough to deny the government a clear-cut majority in the lower house. Whatever the outcome, the present leaders will continue to rule Thailand after the elections and, at least for the short term, there is not likely to be any important change in Thai domestic and foreign policies.

Background to Transition

There is a timelessness about modern Thai politics that is as comforting as it may be misleading. On the surface, nothing important seems to change. For 36 years, Thailand has been ruled by a tight coterie of military officers. In order to run the country, the military has maintained a profitable alliance with civilian politicians and bureaucrats, with whom it joined in 1932 to bring down the absolute monarchy. The civilians have exercised considerable influence, but the relationship has always been fundamentally one-sided. With the exception of a few short periods, the military establishment has called the tune.

Autocratic without being despotic, conservative without being reactionary, the ruling establishment has brought a reasonable share of economic progress and social change to Thailand. With a minimum of serious disruption, it has guided the country through factional strife and foreign occupation, changes in personalities, and the inevitable upsets of an evolving social system.

The promulgation on 20 June of a new and long-delayed constitution appears to have inaugurated a new phase rather than a new era in Thai political life. The constitution was the product of five years of gentle agitation by civilian elements in the establishment, and the realization on the part of

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more enlightened military officers that after ten years of "martial law" the regime needed to legitimize its rule. It was not meant, nor has it been interpreted, as a sharp departure from past practice. On the contrary, Thailand has had seven constitutions since 1932, each establishing the rules of the game only until new players appeared, new sides were chosen, and new rules were needed. Although nine years in the writing, there is little in the present document that distinguishes it greatly from its predecessors.

A crazy quilt of parliamentary and presidential systems, the constitution of Prime Minister Thanom is designed to perpetuate the rule of the military-civilian establishment. It virtually ensures that the present leaders will be in power for the foreseeable future. The document provides for a strong executive appointed by the King on the advice of the upper house of the legislature, or Senate. To complete the tight circle, the Senate is appointed by the executive (with the King's blessing). The Senate was chosen shortly after promulgation and, although the body's president is a civilian, 90 out of 120 seats are filled by military officers.

Almost all of the new senators held seats in the old constituent assembly, whose loyalty to the government was amply demonstrated during the nine years it spent drafting a new constitution. Any doubt about the purpose or political complexion of the Senate, moreover, is dispelled by the presence of several prominent generals, including Saiyud, who is in charge of the counterinsurgency effort; Kriangsak, from the supreme command headquarters; and, perhaps most revealing of all, General Samran, commander of the First Army, whose troops control Bangkok.

The only real departure from the quasiconstitutional arrangement under which the late Marshal Sarit and Prime Minister Thanom set up their rule in 1958 is the lower house, whose members will be chosen in nationwide elections early next year. It will mirror, however imperfectly, long submerged political differences in the country, and will serve as an outlet for the expression of regional grievances. It will also provide a forum for those civilian politicians who have been on the outside looking in for the past ten years. Caught between a powerful executive and a stacked and dominant Senate, and without authority to vote no confidence in the government, the lower house's powers under the constitution are carefully circumscribed.

Despite these strong elements of political continuity Thailand is entering a period of transition. The ten-year interregnum is about to end, and a different, albeit far from new, set of arrangements will follow in its wake. Against its better instincts, the military oligarchy is taking its case to the Thai people. Although there is every reason to believe the military leaders can negotiate the transitional period with their hold on power intact, the subtle pressures that brought them this far may take them a good deal farther than they are presently prepared to

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Prime Minister Thanom Casts His Ballot in the Bankok Municipal Election

go. A great deal will depend on how they run the elections, and, finally, on how well they do.

Bangkok Municipal Elections

If the outcome of the Bangkok municipal elections in September is any sign, the government may be in for a harder time than it anticipated in next year's elections. The Democratic Party, the only nationwide opposition party currently active, took 22 of 24 seats in the municipal assembly. Three recognized government slates managed to elect only two progovernment candidates. The first meaningful election in Thailand in ten years, the municipal election was touted as an important political barometer.

The Democrats have always been strong in Bangkok, but their sweep came as a surprise to supporters and opponents alike. There are a number of reasons for the Democrats' extraordinary showing. For one thing, Bangkok has long been a party stronghold, and the Democrats apparently mounted a low-key but effective campaign there. The other causes, however, cut closer to the bone and have wider implications for next year's elections. In addition to rallying their normal supporters, the Democrats were the beneficiaries of an antiadministration vote that stemmed from local issues.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the importance of the Democratic sweep because it was based, in part, on local issues, however. Rising pork prices and increased bus fares may not have much impact in the countryside, but every area of Thailand has local grievances and the regime is in trouble if voters cast ballots on the basis of fixing responsibility for local ills. The low turnout in Bangkok is a fairly good sign that a major voter revolt is not in the cards, but the voting does suggest that there may be more antigovernment sentiment in the country than has been recognized heretofore.

The Democratic victory can also be traced to the indecisiveness, disunity, and apparent complacency of the government. Administration strength was dissipated by the fielding of three slates, and organizers failed to get out the vote of those who might be expected to back the regime. If some elements thought that last-minute chicanery might carry the day, they had not counted on student poll watchers who saw to it that the election was one of the country's cleanest.

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Whatever the reasons for the Democratic sweep, it may have an important bearing on next year's legislative elections. For the Democrats, the victory provides a much-needed psychological boost. Out of the limelight for ten years and weakened by the death of their leading public figure, the Democrats are suddenly in the position of running, at least nominally, the nation's largest and most important city.

The greatest impact, however, may be on the government side. The election is a major disappointment to those elements who had hoped that a Democratic Party defeat in Bangkok would clear the way for any easy victory in the legislative elections. The Bangkok skirmish may prove to be a rude but much-needed awakening for complacent Thai leaders. The election results are a disquieting sign that the ruling oligarchy will have to put aside its squabbling and marshal its considerable resources if it hopes to gain a clear-cut victory in next year's elections.

The Government Prepares For Elections

With the opening round in the constitutional process already over, with nationwide elections less than five months away, and with three years of planning and organizing under its belt, the government still does not have a political party. There are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that the individuals with the best organizational ability in the government are precisely the ones who have been against elections from the start.

The major problem the government faces in forming a unified political party, however, is simply that the government itself is not unified. The prospect of elections has aroused rather than soothed long-standing factional differences within the ruling oligarchy. On the one hand, there is the fundamental split between civilian "liberal" elements, exemplified by Foreign Minister Thanat and Minister of National Development Pote Sarasin, and the old-guard military establishment. And on the other hand, there are the more important divisions within the military group itself. The breakdown is roughly between Prime Minister Thanom and Deputy Prime Minister Praphat, the two men whose working relationship has kept the country stable since Marshal Sarit's death in 1963.

These factional differences will have to be sorted out and some acceptable understanding reached before the government's political activity can move into high gear. 25X1

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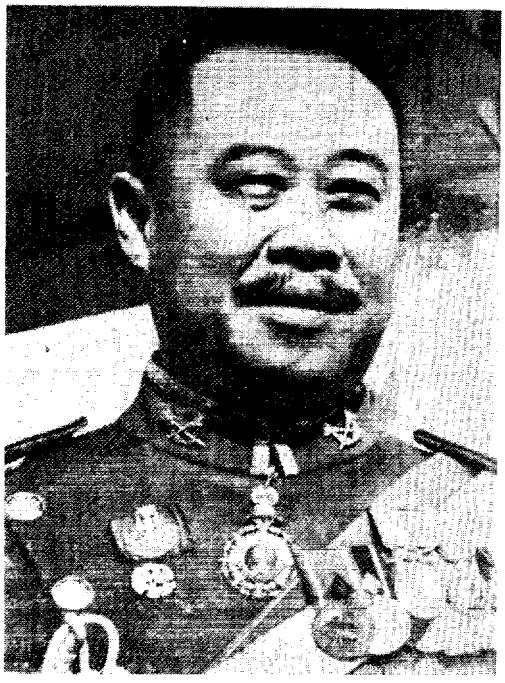
The military leaders hope to create a political party broad enough to include all of the factions that have helped rule the country for the past ten years. At the same time, they would like to bring under the party unbrella those political elements with some following in the country whose ties to Bangkok and the levers of power have been negligible. The faction associated with Prime Minister Thanom has been trying since late last year to line up former members of the National Assembly. Independents, or former members of moribund parties, they are the professional politicians with local connections whose support could prove indispensable in the legislative elections. The effort has been halfhearted and has not gone particularly well. One problem is that many of these politicians, although flattered by their newfound importance and eager to collaborate with the establishment, are confused by conflicting instructions and leadership from Bangkok. Their difficulty has been in determining who speaks for the government.

After an initial period of studied detachment, Deputy Prime Minister Praphat has moved forcefully into the vacuum left by Thanom and his associates. Praphat is in an enviable position to organize grass-roots support for the regime. When he acts as minister of interior, Praphat commands an extensive and far-reaching bureaucracy that stretches from provincial capitals to isolated villages. Whatever its weaknesses, it is the best apparatus in the country.

Praphat's vehicle is the Free People's League of Thailand, a quasi-official, anti-Communist group set up last year by him and his crony, Director of the Department of Local Affairs Chamnan. The league will soon have a spinoff Free Peoples Party (FPP), and Praphat has already signed up an impressive array of supporters. Ironically, they include several well-known leftists such as Sang Patanothai, and Buddhist leader Phra Pi Montham. Neither Praphat nor the leftists apparently intend to let ideology stand in the way of good politics.

Praphat has assured other government leaders that his Free Peoples Party will merge with the government party once the latter gets off the ground. A shrewd political infighter, there is good reason to believe, as many of his opponents suspect, that Praphat intends to use the FPP to further his own ambitions.



Deputy Prime Minister Praphat

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The Opposition

The ruling group is going into the elections divided and lacking a leader who can, on his own, command much support in the country. The regime's deficiences, however, must be weighed against the fact that it still has far more resources at its disposal than do its opponents and that for a variety of reasons they are hardly in a comfortable position to take advantage of their opportunities.

The Democratic Party is the only opposition group that comes out of the ten-year hiatus with a dedicated leadership, a small but loyal following, and a strong sense of identity. The party is the oldest in Thailand. Established in 1946 by a group of former followers of leftist leader Pridi Phanomyong, the Democrats are conservative monarchists, with strong ties to the royal family. The party has been an important factor in every Thai election, and although its strength is concentrated in Bangkok, it has some backing in both the northeast and the north. Even the party's most optimistic supporters do not believe it can muster much more than one third of the seats in the lower house. It is possible, however, that the Democrats and other opposition parties of the center and the left can together win enough seats to deny the government party a clear majority.

The Left

Of all the political groups that are now surfacing in Thailand, none faces the upcoming elections more dispirited, fragmented, or with slighter hopes than the Thai left. Harassed by the government and associated in the public mind with foreign interests, there is good reason to question whether once-influential leftist figures and parties can pull themselves together in time to be a factor in the elections. A number of the more prominent leftists, including some who have spent long years in government prisons for alleged Communist activities, will join government forces in the near future. Other leftists, like Thep Chotinuchit, leader of the socialist United Front, are keeping the faith. Thep has been working with old-time politicians and socialists, particularly in the northeast, in an effort to get the Economist Party ready for the elections. By all accounts, he has had a hard time getting financial support, and organizational efforts on behalf of the party are making little progress.

It is possible, however, that the left may do better in next year's elections than its current strength would suggest. Most of the leftist politicians come from the northeast, where regional identity is strongest in Thailand, and have managed through the years to identify themselves with the region's aspirations. Some of these politicians paid a high personal price during the 1950s for airing the northeast's grievances in Bangkok. It is entirely possible that they will reap their reward at the polls next year.

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The position of former prime minister Pridi Phanomyong, last of the promoters of the 1932 coup, is one additional factor on the left that could conceivably have some bearing on next year's election. Despite the fact he has spent the past 20 years exiled in Commnist China, Pridi is still a name that has to be reckoned with in Thailand. As the country's best-known leftist, and the founder of its leading university, Pridi has become something of a legendary figure among intellectual circles in the capital. The amount of pro-Pridi sentiment in the country as a whole is difficult to determine, but judging by the regime's refusal to permit him to return to Thailand, it may still be a political factor. The revival of political activity in the country may give fresh inspiration to Pridi's periodic thoughts of leaving China. If he gets out, even if only to Western Europe, the weight of his voice and activities on behalf of opposition elements may exert some influence on the way the voting goes.

Amorphous Center

It is still too early to determine how many political parties will field candidates in the upcoming election. The government's political party law prohibits independent candidates, however, and therefore between now and the elections there may be a proliferation of small parties with little ideological standing and few direct ties to the past. In addition, there may be a number of second-echelon politicians with past connections to pro-Phibun and pro-Sarit parties who, not finding a home in the government's party, strike out on their own in the hope they can make a better deal after the elections. The electoral fortunes of these elements will depend on the local appeal of their candidates. Despite an electoral law that minimizes the influences of local-based politicians, splinter parties will probably manage to elect a few lower house representatives.

The Issues

The way the Thai voter casts his ballot next year is likely to be determined more by the personalities of the candidates and the impact of local or regional interests than by anything else. If past elections are any guide, the influence of substantive issues will be all but lost as the voting moves from Bangkok into the villages. Thai political parties have never managed to generate issues or a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo that could precipitate a voter rebellion in the countryside. There is no indication, at this stage of the game at least, that they will be more successful this time.

This estimate, however, is not as firmly based as it may appear. First, a number of important if not revolutionary changes in the countryside have taken place in the ten years since Thailand's last election. New roads have opened up isolated areas, new markets have been created, mass communications methods have been introduced,

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and new patterns of living and perhaps of desires have been created in the villages. Even though the impact of these changes on the substance of rural life should not be overstated, there is little doubt that some of the insularity of the average Thai villager has been worn away in the past ten years.

It is reasonable to assume, however, that although personalities and local interests will still be the most important factor in the voting, next year's election is likely to be more issue-oriented than any in the past. And the opposition, whether or not it is able to exploit them, has several reasonably good issues. By all odds, the most damaging to the government will be corruption. No one issue seems to evoke a more universal and deeply felt response among the Thai people than that of corrupt practices of Thai officials. Young or old, villager or urbanite, educated or illiterate, everybody is against corruption, and everybody thinks the government--from the wayward constable to the venal cabinet officer--is riddled with it.

Prime Minister Thanom has a reputation for being an honest man, but in going to the country, the Thanom government will be also judged by the unsavory reputation of Deputy Prime Minister Praphat and his followers. There is a general consensus that the deputy prime minister has gone too far. The Bangkok municipal election results are an exaggerated but pointed illustration of the risk the ruling group runs if it is unable to dissociate itself from the unsavory reputation of some of its membership.

There are also a number of domestic issues relating to the allocation of economic resources and the establishment of developmental priorities that may provide grist for the opposition's mill. Although Thailand has made considerable economic progress under the military regime, and its growth rate compares favorably with that of other nations, the fact remains that its per capita income is still extremely low. There are some people in Thailand, although they are few in number and exercise only marginal influence, who are asking whether the country's economic gains are being made in the right areas and are reaching the right people. It seems likely that some of the opposition politicians will try to make profit in next year's election by suggesting that there is more to economic progress than a building boom in Bangkok.

The opposition will almost certainly argue the economic issues along the long-standing battle lines separating Bangkok and the central plain from the other major regions. As a general rule, the farther one gets from Bangkok, the easier it becomes to translate differences in economic policies into regional quarrels. Regional differences and attitudes appear to have yielded only grudgingly, if at all, to the considerable changes that have taken place in

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In the south, for example, observers have noted that local politicians, businessmen, and teachers--precisely the kind of people who normally would back the establishment--are growing increasingly bitter over what they regard as Bangkok's indifference and neglect. A decline in the price of rubber--a mainstay of the south's economy--has not helped matters, nor has the example of Bangkok's relatively newfound interest in the northeast sat particularly well. Even in the northeast, where Bangkok has mounted its strongest developmental effort over the past five years, there is little reason for believing that the area's strong sense of regional identity will not be a large factor in the lower house elections.

Foreign Policy and the US

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Bangkok's foreign policy will probably not come under close scrutiny during the election campaign. The reasons for this are that the major opposition groups are in general agreement with the direction of the regime's foreign policy, and more importantly, because they probably calculate that there is not much political mileage in the foreign policy issue. This does not mean, however, that the ruling group's relations with the US will fail to generate debate or interest in the upcoming elections.

Close to 50,000 US military personnel have been moved to bases in Thailand in the relatively short period of three years. This has led to a growing uneasiness over what the Thai regard as the unfortunate by-products of the American presence. The sense of cultural shock, especially strong for a people who take pride in their independence and who simply have not come into contact with large numbers of Westerners before, has been felt throughout the society, including the ruling group itself.

The publication of a bitter anti-US diatribe in one of Bangkok's most respected newspapers, the tongue-lashing US officials recently received from young Thai newspapermen, and exaggerated stories of the offenses of US soldiers, all point to a nascent anti-American sentiment in the country. Although difficult to gauge, such sentiment does not appear to be sufficiently strong or widespread to have a major impact on the elections, but it is likely that even conservative opposition groups, like the Democrats, will argue that the ruling establishment has gone too far in accommodating the US and has not been sufficiently solicitous of Thai interests.

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Prospects

The government may well fail to secure a clear-cut majority in the lower house. Certainly, the record of legislative elections in past years, and the slow progress the government has made organizing for the upcoming one, suggest that the military group may have to settle for something less. The failure to win a majority of the 219 lower house seats will make the government's job somewhat more difficult, but with all of the considerable assets of both friendly and unfriendly persuasion at their disposal, the military leaders should have little trouble patching together a working parliamentary majority from among fragmented and, in all likelihood, opportunistic opposition elements.

Even if such an arrangement is not forthcoming or there is some major surprise in the election results, it is not likely that the lower house will prove overly obstreperous. Whatever their other traits, the opposition politicians currently on the scene are neither idealistic enough to push for fundamental changes in the way the country is ruled, nor foolish enough to think that they could possibly succeed.

Although they may not enjoy quite as much freedom of choice as they once did, the present leaders will continue to rule Thailand after the elections and, at least for the short term, in pretty much the same way. The new constitution and the elections, then, are not likely to bring any important changes in Thai domestic or foreign policies in the near future. The larger question, which cannot yet be answered, is whether the new constitutional arrangment proves to be a first step toward fundamental change in the power system that has been in force since 1932, or only more of the same. Only time will tell.

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It is reasonable to assume, however, that although personalities and local interests will still be the most important factor in the voting, next year's election is likely to be more issue-oriented than any in the past. And the opposition, whether or not it is able to exploit them, has several reasonably good issues. By all odds, the most damaging to the government will be corruption. No one issue seems to evoke a more universal and deeply felt response among the Thai people than that of corrupt practices of Thai officials. Young or old, villager or urbanite, educated or illiterate, everybody is against corruption, and everybody thinks the government--from the wayward constable to the venal cabinet officer--is riddled with it.

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The government may well fail to secure a clear-cut majority in the lower house. Certainly, the record of legislative elections in past years, and the slow progress the government has made organizing for the upcoming one, suggest that the military group may have to settle for something less. The failure to win a majority of the 219 lower house seats will make the government's job somewhat more difficult, but with all of the considerable assets of both friendly and unfriendly persuasion at their disposal, the military leaders should have little trouble patching together a working parliamentary majority from among fragmented and, in all likelihood, opportunistic opposition elements.

Even if such an arrangement is not forthcoming or there is some major surprise in the election results, it is not likely that the lower house will prove overly obstreperous. Whatever their other traits, the opposition politicians currently on the scene are neither idealistic enough to push for fundamental changes in the way the country is ruled, nor foolish enough to think that they could possibly succeed.

Although they may not enjoy quite as much freedom of choice as they once did, the present leaders will continue to rule Thailand after the elections and, at least for the short term, in pretty much the same way. The new constitution and the elections, then, are not likely to bring any important changes in Thai domestic or foreign policies in the near future. The larger question, which cannot yet be answered, is whether the new constitutional arrangment proves to be a first step toward fundamental change in the power system that has been in force since 1932, or only more of the same. Only time will tell.

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